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MY MRS. DESMOND.

[Julie K. Wetherell in N. O. Times-Democrat.]

That was what they used to call her—My Mrs. Desmond—as if she had belonged to me; and, perhaps, I am rather given to enthusiasms.

She had come to the mountains with Mrs. Van Dyke, and had left her husband and children at home, as her physician had prescribed perfect rest for her; and it wasn't a week before we were all in love with her.

She was the prettiest woman—with great, soft brown eyes, full of liquid brightness, a wild-rose flush in her cheeks, and the sweetest mouth. The upper lip may have been a trifle too short; but what white teeth it disclosed! Her hair was her crowning charm. Its color was a golden brown, and it waved, and curled, and floated about, in defiance of all rules and regulations. Sometimes it escaped from the knot and came tumbling about her neck; then she would just put her hands to her head and twist it up again, without so much as a glance at a mirror. How well I remember her as she used to pose for our sketching club—falling into this or that lithe, graceful attitude, with her eyes cast down—a picture of pensive grace. Now and then the long, curling lashes would sweep upward with a flash, and some bright sentence would fall from her lips.

"She's my ideal of a grace, a muse!" cried young Gifford, who wrote rondels and triolets. She was the prettiest creature in a poke bonnet, in a sun bonnet, in a cooking apron, in a wrapper, in boating costume, in powder and court train, every way the prettiest creature the sun ever shone upon.

"I'll have so much to tell Tom and the little ones when I get home from my holiday," she said to me.

"It has all been so delightful, dear Miss Henshaw, that housekeeping will seem very dull prose after it. We women are like that time-worn 'brave boy of Holland,' I think, and have to stop the leaks in the domestic dike with our fingers."

I used to picture her in her charming, orderly home. She impressed me as being one of those women who have a genius for housekeeping—Napoleons of the kitchen—whose bread is never heavy, whose jellies are always clear and firm, and who never tremble at the arrival of unexpected visitors. I am sure she made the most delicious coffee, when we picnicked at Sinking spring.

She had a light, exquisite soprano voice, and she used to sing us song after song, in the scented summer dusk: "Punchinello" and "The Kerry Dance," that made us laugh and cry; "The Queen's Marys," with that soft, shuddering thrill in it, or "The Bedouin Love Song," with all its force and fire.

There was one little waltz song by Aide, which she sang us first as we floated over the lake; and which the whole house sang, and hummed and whistled for days after, in the most exasperating way. I can hear it yet:

"The old waltz 'neath the linden trees
Is wafted on the evening breeze—
How many memories it brings
Of long-departed things!
I see the blind old fiddler stand
Amid the noisy, laughing band:
I see them dance—before my eyes
The joyous groups of youth arise.
Dance on forever—in my dreams never
Shall aught dissever the groups that rise,
Ere future sorrow taught us to borrow
Tears from the morrow to dim our eyes."

There was a young moon sailing up before us, and an echo across the water babbled a soft response to the dying strain.

Prue Desmond looked like the very spirit of music, with her eyes upraised, and her slender hands wandering over the strings of the queer little zither, which was her favorite instrument.

Indeed, young Gifford, who was far too sentimental, told her so, but she disclaimed the idea indignantly.

"How can you say such a thing of my poor little tinkling tunes!" she cried. "This faint moonlight, and the sighing of the pines, make me think of quite another sort of music. Miss Henshaw, you remember how Thomas rendered 'The Damnation of Faust!' Was there ever anything so inconceivably airy as 'The Dance of Sylphs!' And 'The Minuet of Will-o'-the-Wisp'—how it seemed to wheel and veer like sudden gusts and puffs of wind."

That was just like her. She had the most poetical way of expressing herself.

She and I became firm friends, and she begged me to visit her at her home, in Edgewater, during the following autumn.

"It's a suburban home," she said, laughing, "and I believe the suburbs do not enjoy a very enviable reputation. We are always running to catch the 8:21-3 train—and missing it; and they are unkind enough to say that we may be distinguished in any crowd because we have grown 'lop-sided' from carrying bundles."

Accordingly, one autumn evening found me at the Edgewater station. Mrs. Desmond had come to meet me in her pony carriage, with a small boy in livery perched behind. She looked prettier than ever, in a pink gingham gown and a rustic hat trimmed with field grasses, and kissed me on both cheeks in her impulsive, caressing way.

"It was quite dusk when we reached a picturesquely-gabled house, standing in the middle of a garden. "Wait a minute, dear," said Mrs. Desmond, "the gate is off the hinge, and it is rather hard to open." I was too tired and stupid, from my rather long and tedious journey, to observe anything about the interior of the house. After taking a cup of tea, I retired to rest, and I will say that I never slept on a lumpier bed.

In the morning I was disturbed by a servant, who said, "Excuse me,, ma'am, but there's a dress of Mrs. Desmond's in the wardrobe, that she wants." After three such interruptions, I decided to arise. My room, which was a front one, had a pretty view of water and green fields; and as I peered from the window I saw a man issue from the house, and hasten stationward, with a weary limp in his gait. Having completed my toilet I loitered around, momentarily expecting a summons to breakfast.

None came, and at last I went down stairs. Everything looked quiet and deserted. The drawing-room was very pretty, upholstered in dull blue and old gold, and there was a grand piano in the bow window. Everywhere there were signs of lavish expenditure and good taste. On the wall hung a cabinet filled with rare china, and a Sevres court lady, with half of her feathered hat chipped off, languished on a marble pedestal. My eye was caught by a charming plaque—a cupid asleep on a cobweb stretched across from two budding apple boughs, while some robins perched near him, and buttercups crowded and clustered below; and I was fairly entranced by a painting of a beautiful brown-eyed cherub, crying and wiping its eyes on one little downy wing.

In a niche stood a great jar, of which the decorator had evidently grown tired, so that the band of eastern dancing-girls stretched out imploring hands to each other across a forlorn space of emptiness.

But, in the meantime, I was growing terribly hungry, so I sallied forth into the garden, where I had heard a chirping of little voices.

Four children were sitting in the grass, and the eldest, a girl of about 11 years, was hastily whipping up a rent in the dress of the youngest, which revealed a dimpled shoulder.

When she saw me, she came forward with a grave little air.

"I'm Mel," said she, "and I guess you're Miss Henshaw."

I gave her a kiss. She had a pretty little face; but it was actually pinched and careworn, and there was a line of anxious thought between the downy eyebrows.

She introduced the other children to me—Tom, Geraldine and the baby Nello—all lovely children with yellow hair and dark eyes.

"You can kiss them," said the capable Mel, "I washed all their faces my own self, and they're quite clean—except Nello, perhaps. He wiggles so, it's hard to wash his face all over at once."

She escorted me around the garden, and did the honors with dignity.

"Here's mamma's sunflowers," she said, showing me where they hung their heavy heads over the fence. "Mamma had them planted for the chickens, and had that house built," pointing to the picturesque building.

"And where are the chickens?"

"Oh! there aren't any. Some one told mamma how much noise they make, and she got discouraged."

We strolled around, with the children at our heels, and Mel pointed out to me a greenhouse devoid of flowers and a new system of planting strawberries in barrels, of which only the barrels remained to tell the tale.

At length hunger made me desperate

"Mel, when do you have breakfast," I inquired.

"Why, papa and me and the children had it long ago."

"And—and your mother?" I faltered.

"Mamma doesn't get up till about 12 o'clock, and then she just has some coffee and rolls. But," she added suddenly, "maybe you're hungry?"

"I am," said I, shamelessly.

A conscience-stricken and anxious look came over the small face. She darted into the house and returned presently with a piece of stale cake.

"It's all I could find," she said, blushing deeply.

I gave the poor child a kiss and accepted the cake. I ate it, too.

As we entered the house I heard a little pair of high-heeled slippers coming tap, tapping down the winding staircase. It was Mrs. Desmond, in a pale blue gown, with a long Watteau train, embroidered with an exquisite design of pale blue and plain morning glories. She gave me the sweetest smile and kiss, and then leaned carelessly against the piano.

"My dear, don't!" I exclaimed involuntarily. "It is covered with dust. You will ruin your gown."

"Let sleeping dust lie," she laughed. "I think there's a great deal of unnecessary sweeping done—it only raises the dust. The two are rather like bane and antidote."

Meanwhile, Master Nello was amusing himself. He had a copper plate and was dropping it on the marble hearth with a delightful metallic clatter.

"My dearest child, why are you making such a dreadful noise?" pleaded the mother.

"Dat's my tindermin, and I'm a dood boy," replied the sturdy infant, clutching his treasure.

"His what?" asked Mrs. Desmond.

"Nello calls it his 'tindermin,' because he says it goes that way when he drops it," Mel explained, with pride. "Ain't he smart and cunning?"

"Can't you persuade him to go somewhere—anywhere else?" asked his mother.

"I'll try. Come, Nello, and we'll drop the tindermin on the big silver waiter, and it'll make twice as much noise," and fascinated by this alluring picture Nello trotted after her. At last, at last we had the coffee and rolls. I spent a delightful morning. Mrs. Desmond was in her happiest mood, and talked and sang like an angel. We looked over the course of study she was pursuing, and time flew fast.

Six o'clock brought Mr. Desmond home from town. He was a handsome, quiet man, whose gray hair looked quite startling in contrast with his dark eyes and eyebrows; but he had a weary, almost stupefied expression. The younger children clambered all over him, rifled his pockets and pulled his hair, while Mel stood near and protected him from absolute violence.

The dinner was atrocious. It seemed to be the duty and pleasure of the cook to spoil everything; but Mrs. Desmond appeared unconscious of its horrors, and Mr. Desmond resigned to them. The children were present, and ate all sorts of indigestible things; after which they were abruptly bundled off to bed.

In the evening a number of Mrs. Desmond's friends dropped in. She had a natural attraction for nice people, and these were all bright and agreeable—especially Paul Nicholas, who was pursuing the same course of study as Mrs. Desmond.

We talked and laughed to an alarming extent. An author told us his experiences in Roumania, and an artist gave an imitation of the mannerisms of a popular French actor. Some of the younger ones danced, while Prue played soft, plaintive waltzes; or I played, and she floated around the room like a bit of thistledown. Then she sang to us and played us a quaint little Bohemian dance, in which a charming strain had a way of turning up suddenly in a most delightfully unexpected manner. Altogether, I never passed a pleasanter evening. Mr. Desmond had retired to the back drawing-room, where he appeared to slumber. He gave no signs of consciousness until Paul Nicholas struck the opening chord of "The Erl-King," when he started up exclaiming, "Eh! what!" and then relapsed again into quiescence.

The next day, when I came down-stairs, I found Mel curled up on the broad window seat in the hall, with a basket of socks and stockings.

"I'm darning," she said, holding up her work with a piteous face. "I guess it ain't very good, but there's no one else to do it. I wanted Mary Ann to do it, but she says she wasn't hired to darn stockings."

Such a boggle! No wonder poor Mr. Desmond walked with a limp. I sat right down and showed the child how to do it.

"I want to learn everything I can," said she, "so I can make papa comfortable."

Mr. Desmond was an overworked man. Often he staid at his office until 12 o'clock at night, pumping water, one might have said, to pour into a sieve. Mel told me how she used to repeat nursery rhymes, to keep herself awake until he came home. "But papa's 'most as sleepy as I am," she said. "Sometimes when he lays his head down on the pillow by me he dozes right off, and I have to wake him up and send him off to bed."

He would smile vaguely, and say "Hum!" or "Ha!" in response to his pretty wife's fluent prattle, but he had a dazed way of looking at her. I think she was a problem to him.

She was so absurdly young and lovely to be the mother of four children. It seemed as if she must have borrowed them from a neighbor for the occasion; and I think she had something of this feeling herself. She would dismiss them with an absent-minded caress, or a pat on the head. She had very good views, too, about the management of children, which she was fond of expounding in their presence at the table; but, unfortunately, they were always making such a noise that no one could hear what she was saying.

Hers may have been the House Beautiful, but, oh! it was not the House Comfortable.

As for that delicious coffee, it was the only thing she knew how to make.

I shall never forget a pudding she attempted one day—an especial chef d'œuvre, she informed me. Of course it was badly cooked—that goes without saying—and when I tested the sauce I could scarcely repress a shriek

I looked at Mr. Desmond. He was eating it stolidly.

"Good gracious!" cried Prue, "how dreadful! how sour! I must—yes! I must have put vinegar in it instead of wine. Oh, me!" with a grieved, reproachful glance, "how could you let me do such a thing and make poor papa so uncomfortable?"

"Oh, never mind, Prue," said Mr. Desmond, vaguely consolatory, "what's a little vinegar more or less."

But her lip trembled and a tear rolled down her cheek. Mel sprang to kiss it away and comfort her. We all consoled her and in a few minutes she was her usual bright self and began to tell me what a good head for business she thought she would have had if only the talent had been developed.

Every night I said sternly to myself, "Heristta Henshaw, why are you such a moral coward! To-morrow you must speak earnestly to Prue Desmond and tell her she has no right to lay such heavy burdens on Mel's shoulders. The child is nothing but a drudge."

But the next morning, when I looked out into the garden and saw the nymph-like figure in floating draperies, plucking a flower here and there—lovely as Hamon's Aurore, standing on tip-toe to drink the dew from the cup of a morning-glory, or tossing up a few soft, soaring notes, sweet as the voice of a wandering angel—

"Elle est morte en Fevrier,
Pauvre colinette,"

I seemed to feel that this was what she had been born for. Just to be beautiful—just to adorn the world.

I did say to her, "Don't you think Mel ought to be sent to school?"

But Prue replied: "Living in the suburbs, as we do, it would be inconvenient. We did try a governess—a horrid creature, who modeled her costumes and coiffures after mine. Besides, she was perfectly ignorant."

"A boarding school," I suggested; "I could recommend—"

"Oh, no," she cried, almost indignantly. "There would be no one to attend to the children. Do you think I could trust them to hirelings?"

She was the sweetest-tempered woman. I never heard her say a cross word to her husband or children; but no doubt, there were moments when Mr. Desmond would have exchanged her cheerfully for a capable virago. At the worst, when things went very far astray, and the consequences became unpleasant, she only awoke to a grieved amazement.

She was a true poet. She idealized the prose facts of life, and really believed that she lived in the state of perfection of which she dreamed.

This family haunted my nightly pillow, and kept me awake—though the lumps in the mattress may have had something to do with that.

I dusted on the sly, I mended the children's clothes and washed their faces, and taught Mel to sew and cook. I fancy that the most comfortable period of Mr. Desmond's married life was during my stay with them. My mornings were spent in toil and my evenings in pleasure.

The climax was reached when Bridget, the queen of the kitchen, became intoxicated and accused her mistress of having "driven her to drink." This accusation so terrified poor Prue, that I was forced to take the law in my own hands and discharge this belligerent cook. I had some difficulty in persuading her that the drawing room sofa was not the proper place for her to take a noonday nap.

"What a clever creature you are!" cried Prue, in unenvious admiration. "Such a comfort in a house!"

I began to feel a fearful fascination stealing over me. I realized that if I did not tear myself abruptly away I should stay forever in the character of an upper servant without wages. Mrs. Desmond appeared inconsolable when I told her of my intention, and even shed tears.

"We have been so perfectly congenial," she faltered, "and no one can make souffles pudding li-like you."

Mr. Desmond wrung my hand warmly.

"I'm sorry to have you go," he said; "but we could not expect you to live with us. That would be too much."

Having given presents to all the children, I departed amid a tumult of tears, hugs, and kisses from Mel.

Mrs. Desmond drove me to the station, and on the way told me that she had been reading in The Scientific American of the value of ostriches, and that she thought she might try raising a few in the back yard.

"I don't suppose the children would hurt them," she added.

"Far from it," said I.

Our parting was very affectionate. As the train moved off I watched her standing there, shading her sun-dazzled eyes with one slim hand, with the sweetest smile upon her lovely face.

Ah, well! as young Gifford said, she was a muse, and perhaps one ought not to see the muse chez elle.

Residences in Rugby.

A correspondent writes from Rugby, Tenn.: "The pleasant English custom prevails here of designating each residence by a name that accords with the taste of fancy of the owner or builder. You will see 'Glenray,' 'Treforest,' 'Vine Cottage,' 'Yandilla,' 'White House,' and the rest placed beside the front door."